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ABSTRACT

The portrayal of reading, writing, and other selected behaviors on prime-time network television was examined in this two-part study. First, an interest inventory was administered to a sample of 301 elementary students (i.e., grades 1-5) in South Carolina, Virginia, and Pennsylvania to determine their favorite television shows, books, and school subjects. "The Cosby Show," "ALF," "Family Ties," and "The A-Team" were the most highly rated, and at least three samples of each of these shows were included in the second part of the study, which focused on the content of prime-time television programs. Mathematics was the favorite subject of 42% of the students, and 29% chose reading as their favorite. The study of prime-time television used a low-inference measure to record nine specific behaviors exhibited by characters on a sample of 27 prime-time television shows: reading, holding reading matter, writing, smoking cigarettes, drinking alcohol, shooting people, attacking people, killing people, and wrecking vehicles. Results showed significantly more instances of reading than acts of violence per hour, and there were less smoking, drinking, and violence in the shows the children liked best than in the total sample. A discussion of the implications of the findings of this study for parents and teachers concludes the report. Statistical analyses and a list of 19 references are included. (MES)

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Reading on Television?

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Reading on Television?

The effects of television viewing upon reading and academic achievement has been addressed by a variety of groups and individuals. Teachers, parents, educational researchers, the syndicated columinist Erma Bombeck, the political cartoonist Wright, and even the medical and political community when the American Academy of Pediatrics supported Senate bills S.2322 and S.2323 which urged a study of the effects of television violence. These citizens are concerned with both the amount of television viewing and the type of behaviors exhibited exhibited by television characters. Both of these concerns are legitimate. Liberman (1983) reports that by the time children graduate from high school they will have watched approximately 18,000 hours of television, and that they spend more hours watching television than they spend in school. This is an extraordinarily large amount of time spent in a passive and often sedentary state.

Postman (1981) believes that this amount of viewing as well as what is portrayed has a pervasive impact upon our children, a belief that seems to be supported by research. Huesmann (1984), for instance, discovered that boys who strongly identify with violent TV characters are more prone to aggressive behavior. Singer (1982) believes that this type of behavior, as well as others, is acquired by children through three major processes: observation, attitudes, and arousal. In addition, it should be noted then that when children view TV characters engaging in

violent activity which is rewarded, this leads them to believe that aggressive behavior is normal or even acceptable.

The depiction of violence is even more critical to the young viewer because Weissbourd (1985) indicates that children under the age of three have difficulty understanding the concept of make believe. To these children the real and imaginary world are almost one in the same. An amazing example of this can be found in Coleman's book (1983) where in little Charlie came to the conclusion that prisoners were used in scenes where people were being killed. However, his hypothesis was shattered when he saw the same person killed on two different shows!

Unfortunately, the portrayel of violence is not the only content problem of television. The way smoking, drinking, and eating are portrayed also send a message to the young viewer. As Willian Bennett, Education Secretary, stated, "Instead of J.R. reaching for a Scotch or bourbon, might he occasionally reach for a paperback or American Heritage magazine or Family Circle?" Furthermore, Singer (1981) reports that eating on TV is usually a hurry up affair of snack foods. On a more positive note, the amount of smoking exhibited on TV has been on the decline. Singer also reports that children will increase their amount of cooperative behaviors as a result of viewing cooperative behaviors.

As with the effects of violence, there have been many studies concerning the effects of television on reading. Research by Neuman and Prowda (1982) found a significant negative correlation between reading achievement and television viewing in grades four, eight, and eleven, and that there was a positive correlation between reading achievement and reading for pleasure. A

review of research conducted by Williams, Haertel, Haertel, and Walberg (1982) indicated that television viewing has a slight positive effect on school achievement up to ten hours per week. Conversely, more than ten hours per week has a negative effect.

A major study by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) of over 75,000 students aged 9, 13, and 17 added several interesting facts concerning the varied effects of TV on reading achievement. Mead, Searle, and Word (1985) report that for 9 year olds in the NAEP study, reading performance increased as the amount of television viewing increased up to four hours daily. But, at the age of seventeen there is a negative correlation between reading achievement and hours of TV watched. Furthermore, nine year old students who are considered disadvantaged tend to spend more time watching television, with increased reading achievement being correlated with more television viewing. For those in the advantaged group, more television viewing reduces reading skill. The NAEP study suggests that this occurs because television may stimulate and provide information which is not accessible to disadvantaged students. However, Cullinan (1981) indicates that vocabulary gains from television are like fool's gold. Children can sound out the words but do not comprehend them.

Another problem with frequent television viewing is its effect on the imagination. Both Singer and Singer (1979) and Winn (1977) have pointed out that the imagination is not stimulated when one watches TV because TV gives us the images. Conversely, the process of reading requires the reader to create images from

words, which improves imaginative abilities. Thus an excessive amount of TV viewing may inhibit a child's writing ability.

Finally, students who spend a lot of time watching TV are not engaging in other important activities. Many teachers complain about the child who stays up late watching TV and as a result is sleepy during school. Other problems caused by frequent TV viewing are less time spent on homework, conversing with family members, sporting activities, and pleasure reading.

The culmination of all of the research concerning the effects of TV was best stated by Singer and Singer on the television documentary "The Human Animal" (1986). The Singers stated unequivocally that the viewing of violence is not a catharsis and that it leads to violent activity. Furthermore, the more four and five year old children watch TV the more violent their actions become. The children also have lower academic performance.

Methodology

With television consuming a vast majority of the leisure time of this nation's children, the question of what is being portrayed on television was addressed by this study. Thus this study examined the portrayel of reading, writing, and other selected behaviors on prime-time network television. In addition elementary students in South Carolina, Virginia, and Pennsylvania were polled to determine their favorite television shows, books, and school subjects.

Instruments

The data for this study was collected from two forms devised by researchers at Susquehanna University. The first was an in-

terest inventory. One of the questions on this form was: What 3 TV programs do you like best?

The second instrument, which was designed for this study, was used to record nine specific behaviors exhibited by characters on prime-time television. The instrument was a sign system and as such it was a low-inference measure of certain behaviors which occurred; the observers did not judge behavior to be appropriate or inappropriate, but simply recorded the behaviors exhibited. Observers were trained in the use of this low-inference instrument as well as given a set of definitions of the selected behaviors which would be recorded on the instrument.

Subjects

To determine the prime-time TV shows that children liked, a stratified sample of elementary age children in Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Virginia was selected. This sample of 301 children in grades 1 through 5 included black and white children in rural and urban areas in seven different schools.

The sample of prime time shows observed included at least three samples of each of the top four shows which the sample of children indicated as their favorites (see Table 1). The sample also included at least three observations of "The Cosby Show", "Family Ties", and "Cheers" because these shows were ranked consistently in the top five in terms of viewer preference during the weeks of October, November, and December of 1986. Observations of the above shows were the first priority of the study, however a sample of 23 other prime-time shows in the 8:00 to 10:00 p.m. time slot were included. Table 4 in the appendix lists the number of observations of each show included in the sample.

It should be noted that the results of this study are limited to describing the selected sample of 28 prime-time television shows in the 8:00 to 10:00 p.m. time slot, and is limited to October, November, and December of 1986.

Procedure

Researchers mailed or delivered personally the interest inventories to selected teachers in the study. Teachers administered the survey and returned them to the researchers for analysis. These results are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1
Children's Most Liked Prime-time TV Shows

TV Show	# of children who picked as 1 of 3 favorites	%
Cosby	100	33
ALF	87	29
Family Ties	29	10
A-Team	26	9
Give Me A Break	24	8
Growing Pains	19	6
Facts of Life	17	6
Miami Vice	16	5
Walt Disney Movie	14	5
Sidekicks	12	4

Note: 44% of the students reported some type of cartoon as one of their favorite shows, and only two students did not have any favorite television shows.

The same students also answered the question: What subject do you like best in school? The results displayed in Table 2 indicate that Math was the favorite subject of 42% of the children in the sample and 29% of the children indicate readinf to be their favorite subject. Over 50 students selected 2 or more subjects as their favorite.

Table 2
Favorite Subject

Subject	Frequency	%
Math	126	42%
Reading	86	29%
Spelling	41	14%
Science	30	10%
Gym	19	6%
Art	13	4%
None	4	1%
Other	58	14%

The students were also asked to indicate three books they had read and liked. The students selected 512 different books with no single book being selected consistently.

Observers of TV shows were trained in the use of the observation instrument and were given a set of definitions for each of the categories on the instrument. Observers were then assigned certain shows to watch. The observers recorded the number of times each of the following nine behaviors were exhibited in each episode: (1)reading, (2)held reading matter, (3)cigarettes, (4)alcoholic drinks, (5)people shot, (6)someone attacked, (7)people killed, (8)vehicles wrecked, and (9)writing.

After collecting the instruments used to observe the TV shows, the researchers computed the mean score for each of the nine behaviors measured in the study. The mean scores for half hour shows were doubled so that they reflected the occurence of behaviors in one hour segments.

Once the researchers computed the mean score of each behavior for each of the 27 TV shows in the study, the overall mean and standard deviation of each behavior was calculated (see Table 5 in the appendix). Researchers then determined the mean and the standard deviation of each category for each of the four shows

children ranked as their favorite. The same procedure was used with the three shows which were the favorite shows of the American populace.

Results and Discussion

It was hypothesized that there would be more instances of violence than reading on prime-time television. However, the data from this study does not confirm this original hypothesis. In fact, a t-test confirmed that there were significantly more instances of reading per hour (4.5) than acts of violence (3.0) which is a total of the categories: people shot (.5) people attacked (2.0) and people killed (.5). No less important is the fact that of the 28 TV shows in this sample, there was only .4 cigarettes smoked per hour, with 18 of the shows never depicting anyone smoking. The incidence of drinking was 2.3 drinks per hour, however ten shows never depicted anyone drinking. The incidence of someone holding or carrying reading matter was 4.0 occurrences per hour and the incidence of someone writing was 1.9 times per hour. These results are displayed in Table 3.

It is interesting to contrast the mean occurrence of the behaviors between the shows children liked the most (Group 2) and the 28 shows in the total sample (Group 1). As the above table indicates, the amount of reading and reading matter held was higher for groups 2 and 3 than Group 1. However, there was less smoking, drinking, people shot, people killed and vehicles wrecked for the group of shows children liked best than in the total sample. It should be noted, however, that 44% of the students sampled indicated some type of cartoon as one of their top

three favorite shows and that Bee and Mitchell (1978) report that 17 acts of violence occur per cartoon.

Table 3
Means and Standard Deviations for Each Behavior

	Group 1 Total Sample		Group 2 Childrens' * Favorites		Group 3 American ** Populace	
Behavior	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Reading	4.5	2.6	5.8	3.2	6.0	3.1
Held Reading Matter	4.0	3.3	3.5	2.9	5.3	1.9
Writing	1.9	2.1	2.8	2.4	4.1	1.9
Cigarettes Smoked	.4	.9	.1	.2	.7	1.2
Drinking	2.3	4.6	.3	.5	7.3	12.7
People Shot	.5	.9	.2	.4	0.0	0.0
People Attacked	2.0	2.8	2.5	5.0	0.0	0.0
People Killed	.5	1.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Vehicles Wrecked	.2	.5	.1	.1	0.0	0.0

*Cosby Show, ALF, Family Ties, and A-Team
** Cosby Show, Family Ties, and Cheers

Table 3 also displays the mean occurrences of behaviors for Group 3, which were the shows consistently in the top five watched by the American populace. For this group of shows there were no incidences of people being attacked, shot or killed. The incidence of reading, holding reading matter and writing for Group 3 shows was higher than for those in Group 1. The incidence of drinking was much higher for this group than either Groups 1 or 2, (however all of this can be attributed to "Cheers").

Implications

The results of this study indicate that reading and violence do occur on prime-time television. Singer and Singer (1986) do not believe that viewing violence on television is a catharsis

and believe that it ultimately affects the behavior of those who watch. It is interesting to note that many observers in the study stated that they would not have noticed as much reading and writing if they had not been systematically looking for the nine behaviors measured in this study. Perhaps other behaviors such as violence have more impact on the viewer. One might venture to guess that this would also be true for children.

Parents concerned about the violence depicted on TV need to do several things. First, they need to assist their children in realizing that what they view on TV may not be acceptable behavior in their home or neighborhood. In addition, parents may need to monitor TV shows, as done in this study, and then restrict their children's viewing to shows with acceptable patterns of behavior.

It is especially important for parents and teachers to remember that children under the age of three do not understand the difference between reality and fantasy, and believe that what they see on TV is in fact really happening. Thus, parents and teachers must specifically help children to understand this difference.

Another important point for those interested in the welfare of children is the fact that children who watch TV spend less time reading, playing, talking, and doing homework; there were only two students in the sample who did not have a favorite TV show. The more television a child watches, the less time he spends reading. This means that instead of improving language skills and creativity, the child lets the characters on television think for him.

This is not to say however, that watching television is a completely useless activity. The educational television network has many programs which impart important knowledge in a variety of areas such as letter recognition, sight vocabulary, cooperation, and science. Furthermore, one teacher recently indicated that when teaching types of plots and character development during langauage arts instruction the students often mentioned recent television shows as examples of the concepts being studied. The teacher noted that she did not encourage TV viewing, but she did use the children's relevant examples from television.

Finally, parents concerned about the amount of television their children or family watch might read the books by Potter (1983), Charren and Hulsizer (1986), Winn (1977), or Coleman (1983) for suggestions to use TV viewing more effectively or reduce the time spent watching TV. We believe that parents and teachers must encourage independent reading to develop a truly literate populace.

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Appendix

Table 4

Group 1: Sample of Prime-time Network Television, 8:00 - 10:00pm

Prime-time TV Show	Number of Times Observed
A-Team	3
Perfect Strangers	3
Head of the Class	3
Cosby	7
Family Ties	3
McGyver	7
Matlock	5
Scarecrow and Mrs. King	5
Simon and Simon	5
Dallas	3
Night Court	3
Cheers	3
Newhart	3
Magnum	5
Miami Vice	2
Dynasty	3
Who's the Boss	4
Growing Pains	4
Highway to Heaven	5
ALF	3
Murder She Wrote	4
Golden Girls	3
227	2
Facts of Life	2
Amazing Stories	1
Sidekicks	1
Kate and Allie	1
The Wizard	1

Table 5

Mean Occurances of Selected Behaviors on Prime-time TV

	Behaviors*								
TV Show	Rea	He	Cig	Alc	Sh	At	Ki	Wk	Wr
Matlock	3.2	2.2	.4	1.2	.4	2.2	.6	0.0	1.0
McGyver	2.1	1.9	0.0	.4	2.0	3.0	.9	1.1	.1
Scarecrow and Mrs. King	6.2	3.6	.4	.4	1.0	1.8	.4	1.0	1.0
A-Team	1.0	0.0	.3	1.0	.7	10.0	0.0	.3	.3
Perfect Strangers	2.6	5.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.4
Head of the Class	9.4	16.0	0.0	.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.4
Cosby	6.8	3.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.2
Family Ties	8.6	7.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	6.0
Who's the Boss	2.6	6.0	0.0	4.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	3.0
Growing Pains	4.0	3.6	0.0	.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Highway to Heaven	2.0	1.8	0.0	1.8	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.8
ALF	6.6	3.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.6
Murder She Wrote	3.3	2.3	.8	2.0	.5	1.8	.8	.3	2.0
Dallas	1.7	2.3	0.0	10.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	.3
Night Court	7.4	6.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.0	0.0	0.0	2.0
Cheers	2.6	5.4	2.0	22.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.0
Newhart	3.2	8.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.0
Magnum	4.0	2.0	.2	.8	1.6	1.8	1.8	.2	0.0
Miami Vice	4.0	4.5	1.5	1.0	3.5	5.5	3.0	0.0	1.5
Dynasty	3.7	3.0	1.0	8.0	0.0	2.0	.3	0.0	1.0
Golden Girls	3.2	2.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.6	0.0	2.0

*Key Rea = times someone read
He = times someone held reading matter but did not read
Cig = number of cigarettes smoked
Alc = number of alcohlic drinks
Sh = number of people shot
At = number of people attacked
Ki = number of people killed
Wk = number of vehicles wrecked
Wr = times someone wrote